DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 184 UD 025 919

AUTHOR Williams, Patricia A.
TITLE Standardizing School Dropout Measures. CPRE Research Report Series.
INSTITUTION Center for Policy Research in Education.; Rand Corp., Washington, D.C.; Rutgers, The State Univ., New Brunswick, N.J.; Wisconsin Center for Education Research, Madison.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO CPRE-RR-003
PUB DATE Oct 87
GRANT OERI-G008690011
NOTE 33p.
AVAILABLE FROM Center for Policy Research in Education, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ 08901.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age Grade Placement; *Attendance; Definitions; *Dropout Rate; *Dropout Research; Dropouts; Elementary Secondary Education; High School Equivalency Programs; *Measurement Techniques; Nontraditional Education

ABSTRACT

Dropout rates reported by states and school districts are produced by a variety of accounting procedures. Since these rates are difficult to compare and interpret, they fail to correctly measure the dropout rate. A uniform definition of school dropout is needed. The degree of variation was examined by analyzing 21 local definitions. The five largest sources of variation were the following: (1) grade levels used in calculating rates; (2) ages of students who can be classified as dropouts; (3) accounting periods for calculating rates; (4) time periods for unexplained absence; and (5) acceptable alternative educational settings. For many districts adopting a uniform definition might require additional resources and technical assistance. Publication of the rate is a sensitive issue. Solutions to these problems require compromise that will probably result in less than perfect but more accurate dropout data. (VM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

12-10-87

ED298184

CPRE

CENTER FOR POLICY
RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

Standardizing School Dropout Measures

Patricia A. Williams

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

UD025919

THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY
RUTGERS

THE RAND CORPORATION

Wisconsin Center for
EDUCATION
RESEARCH

THE CENTER FOR POLICY RESEARCH IN EDUCATION (CPRE)

CPRE unites the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, the Rand Corporation and the University of Wisconsin-Madison in a unique venture to improve the quality of schooling. Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, CPRE conducts research on the implementation and effects of state and local education policies. By communicating its findings to policymakers, the Center attempts to contribute to the framing of education policies that will have a positive impact on children in classrooms.

CPRE's research activities are concentrated in five major areas:

- Policies on Curriculum and Student Standards
- Teacher Policies
- Educational Indicators and Monitoring
- New Roles and Responsibilities
- Evolution of the Reform Movement

In addition to conducting research in these areas, CPRE publishes reports and briefs on a variety of education issues. The Center also sponsors regional workshops for state and local policymakers.

CPRE Research Report Series

Research Reports are issued by CPRE to facilitate the exchange of ideas among policymakers and researchers who share an interest in education policy. The views expressed in the reports are those of individual authors, and are not necessarily shared by the U.S. Department of Education, Rutgers University, the RAND Corporation or the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This publication was funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, grant number OERI-G008690011.

To obtain copies of this and other CPRE publications contact: Center for Policy Research in Education, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ 08901; attention: Publications. Phone: (201) 828-3872.

CPRE

CENTER FOR POLICY
RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

Standardizing School Dropout Measures

Patricia A. Williams

October, 1987

CPRE Research Report Series
RR-003

THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY
RUTGERS

THE RAND CORPORATION

Wisconsin Center for
EDUCATION
RESEARCH

CONTENTS

SUMMARY---------- v

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS----------vii

I. INTRODUCTION---------- 1
Reasons for a Uniform Definition---------- 2

II. KEY ELEMENTS IN A DROPOUT DEFINITION---------- 5
Grade Levels---------- 6
Ages---------- 7
Length and Dates of Accounting Period---------- 7
Time Limit on Unexplained Absences---------- 8
Acceptable Alternative Educational Settings---------- 8

III. PROBLEMS IN IMPLEMENTING CHANGE---------- 11
Grade Levels---------- 13
Ages---------- 14
Accounting Period for Calculating Dropout Rates--------- 15
Time Limit on Unexplained Absences---------- 16
Acceptable Alternative Educational Settings---------- 17
Exit Documents---------- 17

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS---------- 19

V. CONCLUSIONS---------- 23

APPENDIX: SCHOOL DISTRICT DEFINITIONS OF DROPOUTS---------- 25

REFERENCES---------- 29

SUMMARY

This report proposes the establishment of a uniform definition of school dropout. Dropout rates reported each year by states and local districts are produced by a variety of accounting procedures. Because reported dropout rates are difficult to interpret and compare, they fail to provide valid measures of the extent of the dropout problem. One source of confusion surrounding dropout rates is the variety of definitions used to identify dropouts. A uniform definition would be the first step in standardizing accounting practices.

In order to determine the degree of variation, twenty-one local definitions were examined. Five of the largest sources of variation were: grade levels used in calculating rates; ages of students who can be classified as dropouts; accounting period for calculating rates; time period for unexplained absence, and acceptable alternative educational settings. Each of these key elements confounds the problem of gaining consensus on a uniform definition of school dropout.

Although there are philosophical issues, opposition to changes in accounting practice can be attributed to the sensitivity surrounding reported dropout rates, and the possible need to increase expenditures to accommodate modifications. For many districts, adopting a uniform definition may require additional resources and technical assistance. Solutions to these problems require compromises that will probably result in less than perfect but more accurate dropout data.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to express her thanks to James Fox, James Catterall, Brian Rowan, Susan Fuhrman and Ollie Moles for their helpful comments and suggestions in reviewing an earlier draft of this manuscript; and to Marshall Smith for his original conception of the project.

* * * *

Patricia A. William is a graduate assistant at the Center for Policy Research in Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a doctoral student in the department of Curriculum and Instruction.

I. INTRODUCTION

Each year thousands of our nation's high school students decide or are forced by a variety of circumstances to discontinue their education before graduating. They join the large population of Americans whose subsequent employment prospects are severely constrained. Although many of these students later resume their studies or obtain a high school equivalency degree (GED), a large number do not.

Among this population of students are groups which exhibit particularly high rates of drop out. In large urban districts, where in some cases the rates have been reported to be as high as 40 percent (see Designs for Change 1985; Savage, 1985), a disproportionate number of dropouts are from economically disadvantaged and minority groups (see Howard and Anderson 1978; Rumberger, 1983; Steinberg, Blinde and Chan, 1984). In addition, students who, because of their home, educational, or social environment have historically exhibited poor academic records, are more likely to drop out of school (Alexander, Natriello and Pallas 1985; Combs and Cooley, 1968; Peng and Takai, 1983; Rumberger, 1983). The plight of at-risk students may be further exacerbated by the escalating national interest in raising educational standards. These policies may increase the disincentives to the "marginal" student to remain in school. Thus, in response to this concern, Natriello, McDill and Pallas (1985) suggest that monitoring dropout rates on a regular basis can provide an indication, over time, of internal changes in the patterns of dropouts within schools and districts that would alert administrators to policies that may be adversely affecting the at-risk student. However, monitoring cannot be effective without first deciding what exactly is to be monitored. What constitutes a dropout in one district or state, may not be considered a dropout in another district or state. Therefore, comparing dropout rates can be like comparing apples and oranges.

Thus, to help make state and district accounting procedures more uniform and to improve the comparability of reported dropout rates, this paper recommends that a set of definitional standards be

established. In doing so, the paper examines the variation exhibited by 21 large school districts in each of the key elements that constitute the definition of dropout. In addition, the competing concerns between the rationale underlying a uniform definition and the practical difficulties associated with implementing one at the state or district level, are discussed. Based on this examination, the paper culminates in a set of recommendations for each definitional standard that will be key to making state and district accounting procedures more uniform.

REASONS FOR A UNIFORM DEFINITION

The process of dropout accounting procedures--that is, collecting relevant numerical data, summarizing those data quantitatively, and reporting those quantitative results--is inherently subject to variation. The dropout statistics submitted by local agencies are based primarily on parameters set forth by their respective states for identifying and defining the population of dropouts. However, each of the local agencies inevitably has its own, sometimes subjective interpretation of these parameters. The accuracy of resulting state dropout rates may, therefore, suffer from methodological inconsistency, making it difficult to draw policy-relevant meaning from these statistics.

Thus, one rationale for adopting a uniform definition is to encourage state and local agencies to use more consistent data collection procedures which would enable policymakers to make informed decisions based on accurate data. The severity of the dropout problem can be easily ignored when dropout rates are based on questionable statistics. If revenues are to be expended on dropout prevention programs, there must be credible statistics available to justify those programs and account for their results.

A more consistent set of state and district accounting procedures will provide more precise parameters for identifying not simply the dropout population per se, but also the baseline population from which it is drawn. As noted by Morrow (1986) and the National Education Association (1965), the dropout rate will be influenced by the changes

in the number of individuals identified as dropouts and the number used to define the baseline population. The dropout rate is represented as a fraction with the numerator taken to be the number of persons identified as dropouts; the denominator, the number used to define the baseline population. The adoption of definitional standards for identifying these populations would allow percentages to be calculated on the basis of comparable specifications, and thus yield more interpretable data.

II. KEY ELEMENTS IN A DROPOUT DEFINITION

The definitions used by 21 cities were gathered from original reports published by local school districts, and from secondary sources (the Appendix provides more details on the definitions).[1] Although the specific wording of and criteria used varied among these cities, the definitions were essentially similar in structure:

> A dropout is an individual who leaves school either prior to high school graduation or before completing a program of study without transferring to a private or public school or other educational institution.

Of course, this definition allows for a variety of interpretations because it is not explicit enough to shed any substantive light on what constitutes either the dropout population or the baseline population. The primary elements which give structure to this overall definition and which represent the largest sources of variation among state and local districts are:

1. grade levels used in the baseline population;
2. age range of students who can be classified dropouts;
3. length and dates of the accounting period for which the rates are calculated;
4. allowable time period for unexplained absences; and
5. settings used to identify acceptable alternative education.

In turn, each of these variables acts as a source of contamination on the magnitude and comparability of dropout rates supplied by states and districts.

The following sections highlight some of the differences which

---

[1] Original reports were available from Buffalo, NY (Kessel & Thompson, 1984); Los Angeles, CA (Los Angeles Unified School district, 1983); Milwaukee, WI (Witte, 1985); Omaha, NB (I.C. Young, personal communication, February 14, 1986); and St. Louis, MO (R.H. Edwards, personal communication, February 14, 1986). Definitions were obtained from Hammack (1986) for Chicago, IL; Boston, MA; New York, NY; and San Diego, CA. Additional definitions were obtained for Albuquerque, NM; Atlanta, GA; Cleveland, OH; Detroit, MI; Indianapolis, IN; Miami, FL; Minneapolis, MN; Norfolk, VA; Philadelphia, PA; Portland, OR; Seattle, WA; and Toledo, OH (Casserly, 1986).

emerged among the 21 districts in terms of each element.

GRADE LEVELS

The range and variation in how states define the grade levels that constitute high school represents one of the largest sources of contamination on the comparability of state and district dropout rates. The definitions of two of the districts (Buffalo and Detroit) restricted dropouts to the high school population without specifying the grade levels which encompass high school. Indeed, depending on the configuration of the school district, high school could consist of either grades 9 through 12 or 10 through 12. Moreover, two of the districts (Boston and Portland) limit dropouts specifically to grades 9 through 12, while three others (Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and San Diego) included students in grades 7 through 12. Cleveland and Toledo use the Ohio definition which includes grades K through 12 in the baseline population. Including all grade levels in the baseline population casts a wider net over the population of dropouts, but, because in percentage terms there are commensurately fewer dropouts from this larger baseline population, it would produce a lower dropout rate than one based on grades 9 through 12.

In addition to the obvious comparability problems associated with dropout rates calculated for different grade-level populations--especially in terms of monitoring practices--equity issues arise. Specifically, given the existence of students who leave school prior to the 10th grade (even though they might constitute a small percentage of the population of dropouts), the recognition of this segment by one district but not another might lead to inequitable funding decisions and targeting initiatives for the dropout population as a whole.

Compounding these comparability and equity concerns is the measurement of the population of students in ungraded special education classes. Some districts include, while others exclude, special education students in the baseline population. Thus, the inclusion or exclusion of special education students in dropout counts makes the comparability of state and district dropout rates tenuous. Such comparability is compromised even further by differences among states

in terms of the prevalence of special education students and the types and severity of their handicaps.

AGES

The districts under examination also exhibited differences in their respective interpretations of the age ranges of students in the dropout population. Two districts in particular highlight the range of differences. The Chicago school district defines dropouts as those individuals who are older than compulsory school age. Children who have effectively terminated their education before they reach the age of 16 are considered chronic truants. Conversely, Albuquerque defines dropouts only as those students who are compulsory school age, removing students who are 17 and older from consideration. This representative extreme in accounting practices affects not only the comparability of the dropout rates among states and districts, but also the target population under study. For instance, if policy interest focused on the dropout rates among 16-year-olds, it would clearly fail to consider Chicago a relevant site.

LENGTH AND DATES OF ACCOUNTING PERIOD

School districts generally use one of three accounting periods as the time frame for tracking dropouts--academic year, annual, or cohort accounting methods. An annual (e.g., July 1 to June 30) or cohort (longitudinal) accounting period permits the tracking of students who do not return to school in the fall. Conversely, a September-June academic year accounting period does not. Three of the districts examined--Atlanta, Boston, and St. Louis--use an academic year accounting period and thus fail to count summer dropouts.

Other variations among the districts in terms of the accounting period are the dates on which they base their dropout calculations. Areas with highly migratory populations may have lower enrollments in the first month of school than in the third. Rates calculated on a fixed date, such as the last week in September, could be higher than rates calculated from a later date (e.g., the first week in December).

TIME LIMIT ON UNEXPLAINED ABSENCE

If a student has not officially transferred from one school to another--that is, if records requests have not been received by the school from which the student transferred by the end of a specified period of time--the student is technically classified as a dropout. However, despite the fact that many districts use a time limit in practice, only a few specify this time period in their definition of a dropout. Atlanta and the state of California impose a 45-day time limit on unexplained absences; Norfolk imposes a 15-day limit. In those states and districts which do not stipulate time limits, students can remain in membership (though not in attendance) for an indefinite period of time. Thus, these conflicting specifications of the time period of unexplained absences pose a variety of methodological problems in obtaining measures of dropouts.

ACCEPTABLE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

The dropout rate is also influenced by the number of students who exit from high school and, rather than leaving for good, enter into acceptable educational alternatives. The districts under examination exhibited substantial variation not only in terms of what constitutes "acceptable alternative educational settings," but also in the specificity with which they define them. Albuquerque defines alternative educational settings as programs that lead to a high school diploma, while Cleveland and Toledo require that students must transfer to educational programs for which the State Board of Education prescribes minimum standards. The definitions used by Chicago, Omaha, and St. Louis are more vague, including "completion of a program of studies" as an acceptable alternative to high school. Atlanta acknowledges a "legal equivalent" to the high school program without specifying what the equivalent is, and Detroit's definition simply excluded GED programs from the range of acceptable alternatives.

The variation that characterizes each of these variables underscores the problem of deriving meaning from reported dropout rates. however, they also represent obstacles to gaining consensus on a definition of the dropout population. The following section examines

barriers to gaining consensus and implementing a uniform definition of school dropout. As discussed in the following section, perhaps an even more serious concern is the difficulty in inducing states and districts to adapt to and conform with new standards.

III. PROBLEMS IN IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

This paper has argued that a uniform definition is a precondition for developing meaningful and policy-relevant dropout statistics. However, establishing a uniform definition could require expensive and sometimes burdensome changes in the accounting procedures of many state and local education agencies. The types of changes required by states and districts to implement more uniform accounting practices will vary according to the nature and structure of their specific systems. For example, those states which presently do not collect dropout statistics may be resistant to the expense required to make the necessary changes. Conversely, states and local districts which do in fact have well established data collection systems may be resistant to making any changes at all. To categorize the types of problems that may prevent or discourage states or districts from adopting uniform accounting procedures, Hill and Marks (1982) describe five categories of possible barriers to implementing change:

1. "Technical intractability": The absence of the materials, machinery, or skills required to attain a goal;
2. "Lack of support": the unwillingness on the part of state or local officeholders, service providers, or citizens to make the necessary changes;
3. "Opposition": resistance to the necessary changes from state or officeholders, service providers, or citizens;
4. "Lack of knowledge": the inability of local service providers to implement the necessary changes; and
5. "Lack of resources": the absence of funds required to pay for the necessary changes (p. 92).

In general all of these theoretical barriers are relevant to reaching a consensus on a uniform definition. However, perhaps the greatest obstacle is the third category, opposition, since it is both shaped by and interacts with the other theoretical barriers. For example, there are wide variations exhibited among states and local districts in terms of their budgetary and technical resources.

Opposition might depend heavily on the amount of expenditures available to effect the proposed change, and the operational capacity (i.e., computerized data collection systems) to support it. Moreover, opposition may take the form of subjective responses to the proposed changes, specifically within the educational policies of the states and districts themselves. For example, administrators may also be reluctant to initiate changes for the following reasons:

1. As the educational standards of our society have risen, dropout rates may erroneously be viewed as reflecting the quality of state or district educational programs, especially if used indiscriminately to draw subjective comparisons between states and districts.[2]
2. Those districts in which monetary and personnel allocations are based on the number of students enrolled, provide little incentive for administrators to initiate procedures that may reduce enrollment figures.
3. Though in recent years, there has been renewed interest in the dropout population, the political climate has shifted toward enhancing general education--particularly for the college-bound--with less emphasis on special needs students other than handicapped children (McDonnell and McLaughlin, 1982). The ultimate goal of standardizing education statistics is to improve the quality of education for all students, not merely to collect more data. But local district administrators may view the standardization of dropout data as an unnecessary and additional burden that in the end provides little benefit for those students who are the most in need and no benefit to those areas with relatively few dropouts.

---

[2] A report from the Task Force on Collecting National Dropout Statistics recommends that the validity of policy-oriented comparisons among states or districts is made more rigorous when comparisons are made between those states or districts that share similar significant characteristics, such as geographic region, population size, racial/ethnic composition, socioeconomic status of residents, financial resources, adult educational attainment, and percent population with limited English proficiency (See Council of Chief State School Officers, 1986).

The problem of consensus is compounded by a number of elements used in dropout definitions. The following sections discuss the types of opposition that underscore the difficulty of reaching a consensus on a standardized definition of dropouts. This discussion then serves as the background for the recommendations that are developed at the close of this paper.

GRADE LEVELS

Opposition to standardizing the grade levels used to calculate dropout rates by making them more inclusive of all students may take the form of philosophical viewpoints. For example, states or districts that restrict their grade-level standard only to students in grade 9 or higher may believe that older students are themselves more responsible than younger children for the decision to discontinue their schooling. It is also possible that states and districts may feel that the occurrence and thus counts of younger students' dropping out of school may reflect negatively on the school system.

Another consideration is the additional resources required if dropout monitoring is extended to lower grade levels. This also holds true (though not to the same extent) when special education classes are added to the baseline population. During the 1982-83 school year, screened and serviced handicapped persons between the ages of 3 and 21 years comprised 10.73 percent of the total U.S. public school enrollment. Of those, 68 percent were receiving special educational services in regular classes; 25 percent of those identified were receiving services in special classes in regular schools; and 6 percent were being serviced in separate school facilities (NCES 1985).

Although little data is available on the extent of the dropout phenomenon among handicapped students, there is some evidence that it is in fact greater than in the nonhandicapped population. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1985):

> Data from the National Center for Education Statistics study, High School and Beyond show that (self-identified) handicapped student status was associated with higher dropout rates than for non-handicapped, 19 percent versus 13 percent, respectively (p. 181).

Thus, some of the districts that do not presently include counts of

students in special education classes in the baseline population may oppose including such groups because of the subsequent increase in the number of students who must be monitored and reported, and the additional resources that could be involved. Additionally, if a state or district exhibits a higher rate of dropout among handicapped than nonhandicapped students, administrators may oppose the idea of including them either with regular classes or separately.

Of course on ethical grounds, it can be argued that because the educational system is ultimately responsible for the education of all students, the grade-level standard should be inclusive of the entire system. However, in terms of monitoring activities, opposition on resource grounds might necessitate striking a compromise. For example, extending monitoring to the seventh grade would represent a balance between the additional resources necessary for many states to expand their monitoring activities and the operational modifications necessary for those that presently collect dropout data for all grade levels. Although in the case of handicapped students it would be most desirable to combine all ungraded students into grade levels, there may be some opposition to assigning handicapped students to specific grade levels since they are required by law to have access to educational services until the age of 21. A separate category for handicapped students in ungraded classes, while increasing the amount of paperwork, would provide useful information about special needs students.

AGES

In addition to the resource considerations that characterize opposition to standardizing grade levels, states and districts may also oppose standardizing age levels because of philosophical differences--specifically, whether they believe that the dropout population should consist of students who are older than compulsory school age, younger than compulsory school age, or both. Moreover, legislative intent may compound these differences. For instance, in those states and local districts in which dropouts come only from the population of compulsory school age children, dropping out of school constitutes an illegal act whose ramifications go beyond philosophical concerns; for those who are

older than compulsory school age, leaving school may be considered a legal option, implying that this important segment of the dropout population will be ignored in targeting efforts. Conversely, in areas in which only students who are older than compulsory school age can be considered dropouts, leaving school is probably considered simply an unfortunate but nonetheless legal act (as with Chicago, in which underage school leavers are classified as "chronic truants"). Here, categorizing such students more rigorously as dropouts would of course be desirable on ethical grounds. Thus, these different sources of philosophical opposition as well as the cost of modifying accounting procedures, must be resolved before a standard definition can be reached.

ACCOUNTING PERIOD FOR CALCULATING DROPOUT RATES

Accounting periods (academic year, annual, or longitudinal) are another source of divergence among states and districts. The most desirable accounting period for monitoring purposes is longitudinal or cohort in conjunction with annual counts since it provides a more comprehensive and thus realistic picture of dropout patterns than can be provided by an annual timeframe alone. For instance, a longitudinal accounting period will facilitate monitoring the re-enrollment patterns of those students who are classified as dropouts but decide to return to schooling at a later time. This method of following a cohort, provides inclusive information on the length of time and the student's age difference between withdrawal and reentry into schooling or the receipt of an equivalency diploma. However, despite its value in terms of its inclusiveness, states and districts may oppose adopting a longitudinal accounting period for resource considerations. Longitudinal accounting would require more sophisticated computerized data bases, as well as additional personnel to facilitate record-keeping. Another consideration is the fact that longitudinal procedures may in some instances produce higher cohort dropout rates than those produced from annual accounting.

The least inclusive of the three accounting periods is an academic year (September-June) timeframe; since it assumes that most dropping

out occurs during the academic year. If a higher incidence of dropping out occurs in a district in any given summer, using an academic year timeframe as the basis for calculation produces an anomalously lower dropout rate by failing to account for this portion of the dropout population. Thus, besides the resource considerations that would be involved in changing from an academic-year accounting period, administrators might be resistant to the implications of showing a higher dropout rate, on the quality of their educational system.

TIME LIMIT ON UNEXPLAINED ABSENCE

Standardizing the time limits is particularly problematic in light of the diverse range of recordkeeping and transfer practices exhibited by states and districts, as well as the resources available to them for undertaking such activities as tracking missing students. For example, the difficulty of expediting requests for records from some districts (such as those characterized by high rates of mobility) and the lack of reciprocal agreements among states for transferring records, may impose an upward bias on dropout rates for some states and districts. Thus, there may be opposition to standards that reduce the amount of time that can be devoted to records requests and the accuracy of reported rates. There may also be opposition due to the lack of resources necessary for establishing a more comprehensive records system. A time-limit standard on unexplained absences might, therefore, be impractical. A <u>range of time</u> (e.g., 45-60 days) within which states and districts could choose the timeframe which best suits their specific circumstances would be more appropriate.

Other more intrinsic issues must also be considered in attempting to standardize the time limits--specifically, the effects of standardized time limits on the identification of dropouts. For instance, will shorter time limits lead to an increase in the detection of dropouts and compound the problems of accounting for re-enrollment? Conversely, will longer time limits mean that more dropouts will be excluded from the count?

ACCEPTABLE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Because minimum requirements for educational programs are established by the states, decisions about what constitutes an acceptable alternative setting are made most appropriately at the state level. However, given the differences in the educational standards of the various states, a general consensus on acceptable alternative educational settings is probably an impossibility. Though there seems to be a general trend among states to provide more precise specifications of acceptable alternative settings; a more realistic goal would be to establish a set of guidelines for identifying those students who are in legitimate educational settings. Thus, as with time limits on unexplained absences, it might be more reasonable to consider a range of alternative educational settings which are characterized by states as comparable courses of study and which lead to a high school diploma that is recognized by the individual states.

EXIT DOCUMENTS

One final issue which complicates establishing a uniform definition of dropouts is the fact that some districts issue a variety of exit documents (i.e., certificates of attendance; certificates of completion; special education certificates in lieu of formal high school diplomas). Exit documents may be problematic because students who receive these documents have in fact completed some course of study (although not leading to a regular high school diploma). However, if high school dropouts are defined as those who fail to receive a high school diploma, then students who receive anything other than a high school diploma would technically be classified as dropouts. Some states and districts would oppose this policy because it would increase dropout rates while failing to account for a variety of students' needs. Thus, the most reasonable and target-efficient method of counting would be to include as dropouts only those students who leave school without completing a course of study.

In light of these various associations forms of opposition that might be expressed by state education and local education associations, gaining consensus on standardizing definitions of each of these

variables is particularly problematic. Each of the key elements contributes (differentially) to the problem of implementing a uniform definition. As has been illustrated in this section, opposition to change may result form philosophical viewpoints, sensitivity to anomalously high or low dropout rates, the lack of resources and technical ability to make necessary changes and/or the perceived needs of states and local districts to institute what may be burdensome changes in their accounting procedures. Thus, they must have incentives for making these changes, perhaps in the form of increased resources and technical assistance. Overcoming resistance to change also requires that administrators be convinced of the benefits of more comparable and equitable dropout statistics, both for monitoring purposes and in terms of the inclusiveness of dropout prevention initiatives. However, in light of the various forms of opposition that may be expressed, one must recognize that, in order to improve the status of dropout statistics, compromises must be made in the degree of uniformity that can be expected. It is in recognition of these competing concerns that the following recommendations are made.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

In defining dropouts and the baseline populations, the following procedures are recommended:

1. The baseline population should include students in grades 7-12.

Although the majority of students drop out after entering 10th grade, it is not unreasonable to assume that others drop out before reaching high school. The ideal would of course be to monitor all grades from K-12. However, districts that currently collect dropout data only for grades 9-12 may be less resistant to change if a compromise were reached--specifically, if monitoring were extended on down to grade 7. Moreover, a separate category should be established for handicapped students in ungraded classes, so that the effects of special education programs can be evaluated separately.

2. All ages should be included in the dropout count.

Dropouts should be considered people who have discontinued their education whether or not they are older or younger than compulsory school age.

3. Dropout rates should be calculated on an annual basis.

Of the three types of accounting periods, an annual fall-to-fall timeframe is recommended. On the one hand, resource constraints might make it unrealistic for states to adopt a longitudinal accounting period; on the other, states and districts which collect data on an academic year basis will fail to capture those students who do not return at the beginning of an academic year. In addition, a phasing-in period is suggested to accommodate changes in accounting procedures.

4. Time limits on unexplained absence should be selected from a stipulated range i.e., 45-60 days.

In some states, local districts have the discretion of setting their own time limit on unexplained absences. In turn, because of the numerous differences among the record-keeping and transfer procedures of districts, each district inevitably handles unexplained absences in its own, unique way. Thus, the recommended alternative to setting a uniform time limit is to use a range from which districts may select

the number of days appropriate to their particular circumstances. Although this method might lead to less-than-perfect comparability, it would enhance the prospects of reaching greater uniformity in a dropout definition.

5. Acceptable alternative educational settings should be those that contain a comparable course of study, lead to a high school diploma, and are approved by the state education agency.

Obtaining consensus among states on the specificity with which they define acceptable educational standards would inevitably be problematic, due to the particular intent of state educational policy and legislation. Thus, it would be more reasonable to recommend that local districts be responsible for adhering to the guidelines set by their respective states.

6. Students receiving an exit document (though not a high school diploma) that designates the completion of a course of study, should not be classified as dropouts.

7. To eliminate confusion among districts, states should standardize coding procedures for withdrawal, entry, and re-entry.

Standardized coding procedures would provide more specific guidelines to ensure uniform classifications for withdrawal, entry, and re-entry.[3] Moreover, withdrawal codes should also provide information about students' decisions for leaving school, and their future plans (e.g., economic reasons, lack of interest from teachers, or marriage). Too, both entry and re-entry codes should be provided to distinguish between returning students and those who are initially enrolling in the system. Re-entry codes should provide information about students' activities while out of school (e.g., length of time since withdrawal or reason for returning).

8. Leaver/completers should be counted.

Based on the recommendation of the Council of Chief State School Officers (1986), those students who do not graduate but earn a high

---

[3] For instance, the Council of Chief State School Officers (1986) provides a set of recommended categories that should and should not be counted as dropouts (e.g., it includes students entering the military, but excludes those out of school only for temporary reasons).

school equivalency diploma through an alternate route should be counted. This procedure would provide state and local districts with more information on the dropout population. To facilitate this practice:

9. Application for GED should be made through the last school attended.

V. CONCLUSIONS

A large number of students are discontinuing their education before completing high school. The first step in combatting the problem is for policymakers and educators to realize that a problem exists. One objective of the educational system is to insure that all students receive a quality education. The nation is losing valuable citizens by failing to provide them with the necessary assistance through educational settings that meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population. The effects of inadequate education are reflected in the numbers and kinds of students who drop out of school. But dropout rates that are merely indicative of variations in accounting methodology can not be used to assess educational policies. A uniform definition of school dropout would provide a basis for accounting procedures and promote comparability between rates.

The ideal would be the establishment of one definition that is used by all state and local education agencies. Whatever definition is used, longitudinal change will then have clear meaning. The first step in achieving this goal is for policymakers to agree on the type of information that should be contained in a definition. That information should be as inclusive as possible. The next step requires consensus on how that information should be standardized. When dropout rates are based on a uniform definition and are used in conjunction with additional sources of information they can then serve as one indicator of the health of the educational system.

APPENDIX

SCHOOL DISTRICT DEFINITIONS OF DROPOUTS

Codes: OR = original reports; H = Hammack (1986); C = Casserly (1986)

Albuquerque (C): Any student who leaves or is disenrolled from a school without attaining a diploma for any reason except transferring to another educational institution, attendance in a vocational training program, or death.

Atlanta (C): Any person who leaves school prior to graduation or completion of a formal high school education or legal equivalent, who does not within 45 days enter another public or private educational institution or school program.

Boston (H): Any student who leaves school before graduating for one of the following reasons is considered a dropout: work, military service, marriage, over age 16, did not report, other. (Calculated using straight percent, total number of high school dropouts-grades 9-12/ total enrollment for the year.)

Buffalo (OR): Early school leavers are those young people who leave a public high school before graduating from grade 12 or before completing an equivalent program of studies.
Pupils leave for the following reasons:
1. because they have a labor certificate and a job
2. because they are over compulsory school age
3. because they are not in school and can not be located
4. because they have been institutionalized
5. for other specified reasons such as marriage or maternity or for unspecified reasons
3, 4, 5 are grouped as other.

Chicago (H, C): Any student 16 years or older who has been removed from the enrollment roster for any reason other than death, extended illness, graduation, or completion of a program of studies and did not transfer to another school system. Chronic Truant is a student under age 16 who is not in regular attendance. A student under 16 may not drop out of school and is to be classified as truant until age 16.

Cleveland (C): Any pupil who was enrolled in the school district but did not return to school at the beginning of the school year in question because of withdrawal to other than an educational program for which the State Board of Education prescribes minimum standards. Dropouts would include pupils withdrawn for the following reasons: work permit; over 18 years of age; armed services; runaway; cannot be located by school district; marriage

or pregnancy and not enrolled in instruction for which the State Board of Education prescribes standards; adult education without verified enrollment; and expulsion if not required to re-enroll because of being at least 18 years of age. Specifically excluded from the dropout enumeration are pupils withdrawn for the following reasons: death; illness, approved home instruction; transfer to another school district or educational program for which the State Board of Education prescribes standards; and adult education where enrollment is verified.

Detroit (C): Any student who leaves high school for any reason other than graduation, transfer to another program (not GED), or death.

Indianapolis (C): Any entering freshman who does not graduate with his/her class.

Los Angeles (C): Any senior high school student who left school before graduating because of over age, went to work full-time, institutionalization, entered military, pregnant, marriage, excluded or their whereabouts were unknown. (OR): California Senate Bill 65 passed in 1985. Dropout rate means the percentage of pupils enrolled in any of grades 7 to 12, inclusive, who stop attending school prior to graduation from high school and who do not request, within 45 days of leaving school, that their academic records be forwarded to another school.

Miami (C): Any student who, during a particular school year, is enrolled in school and leaves such school for any reason except death before graduation or completion of a program of studies and without transferring to another public or private school or other educational institutions.

Milwaukee (OR): Wisconsin state working definition of dropouts as students who leave the public schools without graduating from high school and who are not enrolled in another public, private, or vocational school. Students declared dropouts if they were in school the previous September, have not graduated but are no longer in school, and there is no evidence available that they are enrolled elsewhere. (C): Any student who stops attending and has no intention of re-enrolling in another diploma granting school.

Minneapolis (C): Any student who has left the school and school district for one of the following reasons: (1) quit school after reaching compulsory attendance age, (2) enlisted in the Armed Services, or (3) left because of marriage.

New York (H, C): Any student who left school during the school year who did not within the same period re-enroll in another educational setting, and who had not been counted as a dropout in previous years. Students can be legally discharged at age 17 (or age 16 with an employment certificate). Students over 14 who are not found after a search by The Bureau of Attendance are

considered dropouts.

Norfolk (C): Any pupil coded as a W8 at the end of the school year (in June). Any pupil who withdraws during the school year for any reason other than transfer to some other school, promotion, graduation, or death and does not return to school within at least 15 days will be coded a W8 at the end of the school year.

Omaha (OR): Any student who leaves a school, for any reason except death, before graduation or completion of a program of studies and without transferring to another school. The term (dropout) is used most often to designate an elementary or secondary school student who has been in membership during the regular school term and who withdraws from membership before graduating from secondary school (grade 12) or before completing an equivalent program of studies. Such an individual is considered a dropout whether his dropping out occurs during or between regular school terms, whether his dropping out occurs before or after he has passed the compulsory school attendance age and where applicable, whether or not he has completed a minimum required amount of work. (C): Any student who leaves school before graduation or completion of the 12th grade for any reason other than transferring to another school district. This includes all students who dropped out, were expelled/excluded, or died.

Philadelphia (C): Any pupil leaving the public school system before graduation without transferring to another school. Dropout withdrawals can only occur among pupils in grades 7-12 or ungraded or Special Education equivalent pupils who are 14 through 20 years old.

Portland (C): Any student registered in grades 9-12 at a regular high school who left school and did not return or graduate between October 1 and June 30, 1985.

San Diego (H): School leaver includes any student who participated in any grade, nine to twelve, during the school year, had the ability to meet graduation requirements or pass the California High School Proficiency Examination, did not transfer to another school or certified program, and did not re-enter the system by October, 1983. (See Los Angeles for new California definition.)

Seattle (C): Any student who leaves school for any reason, except death, before graduation or completion of a program of studies and without transferring to another school. An individual is considered a dropout whether his dropping occurs during or between regular school terms.

St. Louis (OR): See Omaha (OR)

Toledo (C): Any pupil who was enrolled in the school district but did not return to school at the beginning of the school year or did

not complete the school year in question because of withdrawal to other than an educational program for which the State Board of Education prescribes minimum standards. Dropouts would include pupils withdrawn for the following reasons: work permit; over 18 years of age; armed services; runaway; cannot be located by the school district; marriage or pregnancy and not enrolled in instruction for which the State Board of Education prescribes minimum standards; institutional placement without a program for which the State Board of Education prescribes standards; adult education without verified enrollment; and expulsion if not required to re-enroll because of being at least 18 years of age. Specifically excluded from the dropout enumeration are pupils withdrawn for the following reasons: death; illness, approved home instruction; transfer to another school district or educational program for which the State Board of Education prescribes minimum standards; and adult education where enrollment is verified.

REFERENCES

Alexander, K. L., G. Natriello, and A. M. Pallas. 1985. For Whom the Bell Tolls: The Impact of Dropping Out on Cognitive Performance (Tech. Rep. 356). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, Center for Social Organization of Schools.

Casserly, M. 1986. "Preliminary Technical Analyses of Dropout Statistics in Selected Great City Schools." Washington, DC: Council of the Great City Schools.

Combs, J. and W. W. Cooley. 1968. "Dropouts: In High School and After School." American Educational Research Journal, 5:343-363.

Council of Chief State School Officers. 1986. Collecting National Dropout Statistics. Washington, DC: Author.

Designs for Change. 1985. The Bottom Line: Chicago's Failing Schools and How to Change Them. Chicago: Author.

Hammack, F. M. 1986. "Large School Systems' Dropout Reports: An Analysis of Definitions, Procedures and Findings." Teachers College Record, 87:324-342.

Hill, P. T., and E. L. Marks. 1982. Federal Influence over State and Local Government: The Case of Nondiscrimination in Education. Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation.

Howard, M. A., and R. J. Anderson. 1978. "Early Identification of Potential School Dropouts: A Literature Review." Child Welfare, 57:221-231.

Kessel, M. A. and A. Thompson. 1984. Report of Early School Leavers, 1982-83. Buffalo, NY: Buffalo, New York Board of Education, Division of Finance, Personnel and Research.

Los Angeles Unified School District. 1983. Early School Leavers: High School Students Who Left School Before Graduating, 1981-82. Los Angeles: Author.

McDonnell, L. M. and M. W. McLaughlin. 1982. Education Policy and the Role of the States. Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation.

Morrow, G. 1986. "Standardizing Practice in the Analysis of School Dropouts." Teachers College Record, 87:342-355.

National Center for Education Statistics. 1985. The Condition of Education. Washington, DC: Author.

National Education Association. 1965. Dropout Studies: Design and

Conduct. Washington, DC: Author.

Natriello, G., E. L. McDill and A. M. Pallas. 1985. "School Reform and Potential Dropouts." Educational leadership, 43:1, 10-14.

Peng, S. S. and R. T. Takai. 1983. High School Dropouts: Descriptive Information from High School and Beyond. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Rumberger, R. W. 1983. "Dropping Out of High School: The Influence of Race, Sex and Family Background." American Educational Research Journal, 20:199-220.

Savage, D. G. 1985. "High School Dropouts: Door Still Revolves in Inner City." Los Angeles Times (May 7), pp. 25-28.

Steinberg, L., P. L. Blinde and K. S. Chan. 1984. "Dropping Out Among Language Minority Youth." Review of Educational Research, 54:113-132.

Witte, J. F. 1985. Metropolitan Milwaukee Dropout Report, No. 3. Milwaukee: Milwaukee Public Schools.